

# Maritime Security in the Gulf: Addressing the Terrorist Threat

In a little-noticed ceremony in Djibouti on December 12, 2005, Royal Netherlands Navy Commodore Hank Ord relieved his French Navy counterpart – Vice Admiral Jacques Mazars of command over an operation that has come to be known in military circles as Combined Task Force 150, or CTF 150. The task force features coalition participation by the navies of Germany, France, Pakistan, the Netherlands, the United Kingdom and the United States. Established after the U.S. assault on Al Qaeda and the Taliban in Afghanistan, this coalition naval force conducts continuous maritime security operations in the Persian Gulf, North Arabian Sea, Gulf of Oman, parts of the Indian Ocean and the Red Sea – an operational area of an estimated 2.5 million square miles with as many as 14,000 surface vessels on any given day.



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grow from approximately 80 million barrels a day in 2005 to 118-120 million barrels by 2020. This will only further increase tanker traffic through the already crowded Strait of Hormuz – and the number of potential soft targets carrying oil and natural gas.

The unpoliced world's seas provide the essential highway for the increasingly networked and interdependent global economy. Eighty percent of all global trade occurs through seaborne traffic, which totaled an estimated 5.9 billion metric tons in 2002. As much of 90 percent of the world's

general cargo is packed into twenty-foot equivalent units, or TEUs. It is estimated that 230 million containers pass through international ports on an annual basis. This trade is carried on approximately 46,000 ships that call at 2,800 ports around the world.<sup>1</sup> Of these ports, 30 “megaports” have emerged as critical nodes in this interdependent web. There is growing recognition in capitals around the world of the emerging terrorist threat to the world's oceans – regarded by some to be yet another example of “ungoverned spaces” used by terrorists to plan and execute operations outside the oversight of normative rules-based governance. For example, in September 2005 the Bush Administration released the latest in its series of national security strategy documents titled *National Strategy for Maritime Security*. The document firmly establishes protection of the seas as a critical mission facing the United States as part of its war on Islamic extremists around the world. While the activities of CTF 150 in and around the Persian Gulf preceded the promulgation of this new document, it is clear that the model established by this coalition naval operation could become a model to emulate elsewhere around the world as the international community grapples with the problem of maritime insecurity.

## Building Collective Maritime Security in the Gulf

According to the US Naval Forces Central Command, the purpose of CTF 50 is to “preserve the free and secure use of the world's oceans by legitimate mariners and prevent terrorists from attempting to use the world's oceans as a

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Maritime security in the Gulf is critical for both the regional states and the global economy. An estimated 15-16 million barrels of oil per day transits through the Strait of Hormuz to customers around the world, and any disruption of this traffic could have far-reaching effects on the global economy. All these oil tankers lack essential self defense capabilities and provide a relatively easy target for maritime terrorists and pirates. Moreover, shipping container traffic in and through the Gulf has grown dramatically in the last decade. Dubai and the free port area of Jebel Ali is now one of the largest container traffic hubs in the world, with millions of containers passing through Gulf waters annually on to their way to third country destinations. Al Qaeda and other extremist groups are known to have an active presence in the Gulf and have used facilities in Dubai and elsewhere to support their global operations. The importance of the Gulf as a source of oil and as a container transshipment node will only grow in the years ahead, with global oil consumption projected to

<sup>1</sup> Figures drawn from Michael Richardson, “A Time Bomb for Global Trade: Maritime-related Terrorism in an Age of Weapons of Mass Destruction,” Institute for South East Asian Studies, February 25, 2004.

<sup>2</sup> Release #56-05, 2005, Tom Jones, “Maritime Security Operations: a Critical Component for Security and Stability,” June 7, 2005, US Naval Forces Central Command.



venue for attack or as a medium to transport personnel or material.<sup>2</sup> In some senses, CTF 150 is the logical outgrowth of the coalition naval operation spearheaded by the United States during the 1990s in the Gulf to enforce the United Nations' trade embargo on Iraq pursuant to UN Security Council Resolutions 661 and 665. Under the auspices of the Maritime Intercept Operations, as they came to be called, coalition naval personnel boarded vessels in and around the Persian Gulf for over a decade. The regional cooperation built under MIO during the 1990s built relationships with coalition and GCC navies that laid the foundation for a transparent and open system of maritime security in the Gulf's confines. That transparency was built though providing Gulf navies with the ability to track maritime traffic in the region through domain awareness provided by a version of U.S. global command and control system.

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This approach is now being applied by CTF 150 in a broader context as part of the international effort to combat terrorism and prevent Al Qaeda and other extremist groups from using the seas to target shipping traffic and as means to provide logistical support to support their transnational networks. Efforts in and around the Gulf to police the seas are mirrored in the Mediterranean with NATO's Operation Active Endeavor and Operation Active Effort spearheading a similar effort aimed at providing maritime security in response to terrorist threats and attacks.<sup>3</sup> The Singapore Navy also is taking the lead to improve maritime security in the pirate-infested waters surrounding the critical chokepoint in the Malacca Straits.<sup>4</sup> The Gulf promises to become a critical area for international cooperation between regional and international powers seeking to establish a system of maritime security that may eventually include the critical choke points through which most of the world's sea borne cargos must pass.

## The Threat of Maritime Terrorism and Piracy

The necessity of improving maritime security in the Gulf and elsewhere is obvious. It is clear that Al Qaeda and other

extremist groups are targeting the maritime domain and are using it to support their operations.<sup>5</sup> Today, the world's oceans provide an indispensable component to Al Qaeda affiliated activities transporting people and illicit cargoes that directly and indirectly support their global operations. Shipping insurance giant Lloyds of London has reported that Norwegian intelligence believes that Al Qaeda may own or control between 15-23 freighters flying the flags of Yemen, Somalia, and Tonga.<sup>6</sup> The activities of these groups harkens back to terrorism during the 1980s, when Palestinian Liberation Front terrorists hijacked the Italian-flagged cruise ship Achille Laro off Port Said as part of their efforts to secure the release 50 Palestinian prisoners held by the Israelis. It is also known that Al Qaeda extremists mounting the attacks in Istanbul in November 2003 were interested in targeting Israeli cruise ships frequenting the port of Antalya. A brief review of planned and actual operation by Al Qaeda and other terrorist groups reveals the danger posed to maritime security in the Gulf and elsewhere:

- A vessel operated by Al Qaeda delivered the explosives used in the August 1998 attacks on the US Embassies in East Africa that resulted in the deaths of 12 Americans and many more local citizens.
- The failed January 2000 attack by Al Qaeda operatives against the USS Sullivan in Aden. The boat carrying the explosives sank during the operation.
- In 2001, the Tamil Tigers conducted a coordinated suicide attacks by five boats off the coast of Sri Lanka
- In the summer of 2002, Saudi authorities arrested a group of militants plotting to sabotage the world's largest offshore oil terminal at Ras Tanura.
- In June 2002, Moroccan authorities uncovered an Al Qaeda plot to target civilian and military shipping passing through the Strait of Gibraltar. The October 2002 capture of the plot's organizer, Abd al Rahman Nashiri, revealed a multi-part strategy aimed at blowing up ships in port, attacking larger vessels such as supertankers from the air, and attacking ships using underwater mines or suicide bombers. Nashiri was also believed to have been involved in a plot to attack the US naval headquarters in Bahrain in January 2002.
- The successful November 2000 attack on the USS Cole that killed 19 U.S. sailors.
- October 2002 attack on the French-owned supertanker Limburg off the coast of Yemen, which was rammed by a

<sup>3</sup> Details of NATO's operation are provided in Ali Koknar, "Maritime Terrorism: A New Challenge for NATO," Institute for Analysis of Global Security, January 24, 2005 as posted at <http://www.iags.org/n012405.htm>

<sup>4</sup> Patrick Goodenough, "Maritime Terror Concerns Prompt New Initiatives in SE Asia," CNSNEWS.com, March 2, 2005

<sup>5</sup> For a broader look at maritime terrorism see Gal Luft and Anne Korin, "Terrorism Goes to Sea," *Foreign Affairs*, November/December 2004. Also see John Daly, "Al Qaeda and Maritime Terrorism, Part I," *Terrorism Monitor*, Vol.1, Issue 4, October 24, 2004, The Jamestown Foundation.

<sup>6</sup> As cited in Koknar, op.cit.



suicide bomber in a small craft. The attack resulted on one death and an oil spill into the Red Sea.

- In December 2003, coalition naval forces confiscated three drug shipments from several dhows in the Gulf worth an estimated \$15 million. It was later determined that seven of the 45 crewman had links to Al Qaeda, which was using the drug trade to finance its operations.
- Unsuccessful April 2004 attack by an unidentified dhow on the Iraqi Khawr al Amaya and al Basrah oil terminals that resulted in the deaths of two sailors and one US coastguardsman. The attack was orchestrated by the Zarqawi network in Iraq. The attack shut down the terminal for two days, resulting in an estimated \$40 million in lost oil export revenues.
- Unsuccessful rocket attack in August 2005 on the US naval vessels Ashland and Kearsage while docked in Aqaba mounted by terrorists associated with the Zarqawi network in Iraq.

In addition to the terrorist threat to maritime security, the international community is addressing the growing problem of international piracy and smuggling around the world, with CTF 50 leading efforts in and around the Gulf to address this problem. This is a particular problem off the coast of Somalia and in the Northern Arabian Gulf. Reporting by the Office of Naval Intelligence in December 2005 provided to international mariners indicates incidents during the previous month involving hijacking, robbery and kidnapping. A particular focus of CTF 50 is smuggling and possible terrorist maritime activities along the largely unpoliced Makran coast off Pakistan.

## Coalition Interoperability and Cooperation

Navies of the Gulf Cooperation Council have yet to formally participate in CTF operations, though it seems clear that these regional navies can and should play a role to help address the threat to shipping on which their economic survival depends. The growing problem of maritime security also suggests that it's time for the GCC states to boost their shallow-water coast guard capabilities to operate in the Gulf's shallow waters that are unsuited for larger naval vessels operated by the CTF 150 coalition partners. The GCC's lack of formal participation in CTF 150 operations is thought by some to result from their reluctance to be seen endorsing a U.S.-lead initiative associated with the war on terrorism – a "war" without widespread public support throughout the Gulf and the Middle East.

The Bush Administration has outlined an aggressive strategy to build international support for an integrated

effort to strengthen enforcement actions to deal with the maritime threat. As outlined in the National Strategy for Maritime Security, this effort includes such steps as: (1). Implementing standardized international security and World Customs Organization Frameworks for customs practices and standards; (2) Expanding the use of modernized and automated systems, processes and trade-data information to make vessel registration, ownership, and operation, as well as cargo identification, more transparent and readily available; (3) Improving information exchange between intelligence and law enforcement communities on the terrorist maritime threat; (4) offering maritime and port security training to interested countries and prioritizing security assistance programs to offer help in port security and the maritime domain; (5) encouraging all countries to increase their maritime domain awareness capabilities, which can in turn be shared throughout critically important regions.<sup>7</sup>

The area of maritime security provides the GCC countries with an ideal opportunity to join together with the CTF 150 operations by providing complementary shallow-water capabilities to help police the Gulf, which is populated by thousands of dhows on any given day. The GCC countries have in the past demonstrated only superficial interest in integrating their military forces and providing effective collective defense capabilities. But the issue of maritime security and domain awareness should be embraced by all regional states, all which can offer unique contributions to the daunting task facing the CTF 150 coalition partners to provide maritime security the vitally important waterways in around the Gulf.

## About the Author

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<sup>7</sup> National Strategy for Maritime Security, The White House, Washington, DC, September 2005, pp. 14-15.